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ABSTRACT

A program placing 115 full-time students of English as a second language in a Canadian community college into job situations as part of a survival English course during 1982-83 was undertaken. The purpose was to give students an opportunity to: explore jobs and learn related terminology, inquire about what is required to become established in a field, learn about employment and customs in the region, practice English in daily usage, evaluate their skills and knowledge, have others become acquainted with them and with their skills, and generally gain confidence for the eventual job search. Students were chosen on the basis of their interest and readiness and the potential benefit to both student and employer. Jobs similar to, or using skills related to, previous employment were sought. Students came from 20 countries, the majority from Vietnam and Poland. Matching student and job involved assessing the student's level of self-confidence, knowledge and experience, the job's location, and urgency of employment need. It was found that the program provided opportunities in the classroom to enhance English skill development before, during, and after the workplace experience. In addition, at least 20 students got full- or part-time employment as a direct or indirect result of the program. Both students and businesses felt they benefitted. Problems included student resentment at not being paid and disappointment at not working at the level or in the field of their training or experience. (MSE)

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LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

July 13, 1984

A synopsis of a project carried out during 1982/3 in Regina, Sask., Canada

Roberta Kullman

This paper will describe the rationale for placing fulltime English as a Second Language students in a "job situation" as part of their course, as well as define the criteria for selection of those who participated and then describe the procedures for arranging the placements. The numbers of students, as well as their backgrounds and ages will also be presented.

During the 1982/3 academic year 115 out of the 155 students who attended fulltime courses in Occupational English at the Regina Plains Community College participated in the "Language Experience in the Workplace" program. The program is still in infancy. Obviously, 1982/3 formed the base on which to build, expand and improve. This year the program is again in operation.

Federal Government sponsored fulltime classes are held at the Community College from 9:00 to 3:30 Monday through Friday for sixteen week periods. Although the classes are intended for recently arrived immigrants and refugees who qualify under the Canada Employment and Immigration Centre guidelines, and are called "Occupational English" classes, the thrust of the course lies in the learning of basic survival English. It is hoped that the students will complete the course with enough knowledge of English to be able to obtain employment.

Thirteen classes of Occupational English were held from September, 1982 to the end of June, 1983. Since one of the goals of Occupational English is to prepare students, who need to learn English, for the workforce,

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it was decided that a good approach to this end would be to actually place the students in a work situation. This type of arrangement has met with considerable success (although the reasons behind it differed), in other Adult Basic Education classes at the Community College. The Life Skills and Job Skills courses have been actively involved in "Work Experience" as part of the course for the last five years.

During weeks fourteen and fifteen of the Occupational English course students were placed in a job situation, from Monday to Friday on a half-day basis, and attended regular classroom sessions the other half-day. Since the majority of the students are sponsored by the Canada Employment and Immigration Centre (CEIC) into the course, and receive a training allowance while attending classes this income source to the student did not change during the work experience and the student did not receive additional pay from the employer for the time spent "on the job".

RATIONALE

The reasons for incorporating the "Language Experience in the Workplace" component into the Occupational English program were:

1. To give the students an opportunity to explore jobs related to their past training or education, in a Canadian setting and, to learn the terminology related to it. (Obviously it is not possible to teach twelve different career jargons in the same classroom to students who are starting out with little or no English).
2. To give the students a chance to make enquiries about what is required to become established in a particular field for when they are ready for the workforce (i.e.; are exams necessary, internship, apprenticeship, certification, etc.)

3. To give the students a look at what it is like to work in Canada, and our local region in particular. Cultural differences could be significant concerning the labour force. (Things such as punching a time clock, restricted coffee breaks or the kind of clothing that is appropriate or acceptable for different types of jobs), as well as to find out about employee benefits and obligations that may vary considerably from the work environment that one was accustomed to before emigrating. Here, if nowhere else they will learn that our society is a "time conscious" one.
4. The student has a chance to mingle with native-born English speakers and can practise English in everyday context, picking up slang expressions and observing social traits and non-verbal behaviour and gestures that accompany it. Many students never have an opportunity to make such observations until they are actually immersed in the work world, other than the contrived situations used in the classroom. During social and business interaction in the job situation the student is encouraged to ask fellow employees about the job market and for suggestions as to what businesses might be interested in accepting an application. If the student is doing well in the workplace and feels comfortable s/he can ask the employer about the possibility of leaving a resume for future consideration.
5. It gives the students opportunities to evaluate their skills and knowledge in a field of work similar to, if not the same as, what his or her experience and background was, in Canada. Standards can be compared and thus the student can be more realistic in his/her job search goals.
6. Somebody else is evaluating the students' skills and will become

acquainted with their work habits and thus be useful for giving references in the future. (Remember that most of the students are recent arrivals and do not know anybody whose name they can use for reference!)

To summarize, the whole exercise is intended to help the student feel more secure and confident when eventually faced with the moment to begin an active job search.

CRITERIA USED IN SELECTING STUDENTS

Basically everyone in Occupational English would be given an opportunity, or even encouraged, to participate in the program, but that the student, the instructor and the work placement coordinator would mutually agree that the student was ready for the experience and that the student and the employer would benefit from it in some way.

Students were asked to make suggestions as to the type of career they were interested in exploring. This was usually similar to, or the same as what they had been trained for or had worked at previously. For some we suggested looking at new areas if it was felt that there would not be much of a chance to continue his/her career given the circumstances at the time: ship builders might be asked to look at general carpentry, forest rangers might be placed at green houses and professional fishermen or rice farmers could begin to think of a completely different career if they intended to stay in the prairie regions.

Sixty-one males who ranged in age from nineteen to fifty-six and for who the average age was twenty-eight, and fifty-four females ranging in age from seventeen to fifty-five and averaged twenty-seven and a half years old participated in the program. (see figure 1) The majority of them,

forty in total, were from Vietnam, with Poland running second with twenty-nine. There were seven from Roumania, six from each of Hong Kong, Chile, Czechoslovakia, three from Quebec, two from Hungary, El Salvador, Laos, China and Afghanistan; and one from each of the following countries: India, Cambodia, Burma, Ethiopia, Taiwan, Guatemala, France and Albania. (see figure 2)

PROCEDURE

In order to be able to make satisfactory arrangements for each student to be placed in a business or agency directly related or similar to the type of previous training, education or work experience that s/he had, or of his/her choice, three weeks were necessary for a class comprised of twelve students, prior to the date the placement was to begin. The coordinator would first examine the government records on file at the Community College for written history and then briefly discuss with the instructor whether it was possible that some of the students would not profit from the experience. Most of the students were encouraged to participate but if anyone had strong negative feelings that was accepted and the issue was no longer pursued.

Reasons that forty of the 155 Occupational English students did not participate were the following:

1. The level of English was too low and the instructor and coordinator mutually agreed that the experience would not be a positive one.
2. Some students thought that their area of interest was too specialized to enable them to benefit from a work experience of short duration and preferred to remain in the classroom to study related vocabulary, and do research into the trade or profession, with the aid and guidance of the

instructor.

3. In a couple of instances the students could not be convinced that the placement would promote opportunities for employment. Perhaps cultural factors played a part. (They seemed to think that they should not have to work for free; even though most of them were receiving training allowances from CEIC for the time period involved they believed that the learning should take place in the formal classroom setting).
4. A couple of students had health reasons for not participating, and a few of the women were pregnant and did not plan to enter the workforce upon completion of the course.
5. Some had part-time employment at the time, as well as attending school and felt that the experience would not benefit them, as they were already familiar with the workforce in Saskatchewan.

Of the 115 placements that were arranged:

- 1 elderly lady refused to go when the day arrived.
- 3 students discontinued the course before the placement began.
- 5 students discontinued the course during placement.
- 2 students discontinued the placement but continued the course.

During the coordinator's personal interview with the student a record file was begun. Besides personal and family information such as age, family commitments and responsibilities it was also necessary to determine the level of education achieved, past work history and future goals as well as the ability to speak and understand the English language.

The next step was to explore the labour market and to explain the program to potential business participants. Personal contact proved to be vital in helping the employers fully understand the program. Employers

were always left with written material explaining the program. In trying to match a student to a business or agency some of the things considered were:

1. The level of self-confidence the student displayed and whether s/he would be more comfortable in a small, 'secure' and warm work environment where there would be more personal support, or if they were able to cope with bigger, more impersonal corporations that may have more to offer in the way of expertise, equipment, etc.
2. The students' actual knowledge of and experience in the field s/he's exploring and the needs of the business at that particular time. (i.e.; some businesses may be pleased to have an 'extra hand' at a busy time or it may be a slow period and the staff has more time to spend with and help the student). Sometimes the employer would say that business was so slow at that time and employees were being laid off so it was impossible to take anyone else, and others might say that they were so busy that they couldn't have anybody else around because they might get in the way".
3. The location of the business so it would not pose undue transportation problems for the students. (The public transportation system in our city is not the most convenient or accessible.)
4. How urgently the student needed to obtain employment after terminating the Occupational English course. If the student desperately needed a job it was sometimes better to place him/her where it was known that there would be a vacancy even though the type of work was not exactly what the student would have ideally hoped for or could wait for.

After completing the public relations part of arranging a placement and 'selling' the idea to local business, industry and government agencies it was time to take the students to meet their bosses and to see for themselves the environments in which they would be working. It was usually best to do this about the middle of the week before the actual starting date. If it was done too far in advance students tended to develop 'stage fright' and either wanted to withdraw from the program, request something different or dwell on it to the point of not being able to learn anything else in class.

A few days after the initial verbal agreement, letters of confirmation were sent to each place that had accepted a student. This was simply to remind the business to expect a new face in the establishment the following week. With the letter an evaluation form and envelope would also be included with the request that the form be completed and returned to the coordinator, with the student on the last day of work.

The majority of students were placed in "Human Services" types of situations, followed by "Trades". To a much lesser extent "Technologies", "Arts", "Office" and "Sales" situations were utilized. (see figure 3)

Unless a specific problem arose the coordinator would generally make only one personal visit to the employer during the two-week period, although it was always made very clear that she was available to sort out problems that may arise at the request of the employer or the student, at anytime. At the end of the two-week period each business was sent a thank you letter by the coordinator and in most cases, the student. A few of the students did not feel they wanted to send thank you letters. That was acceptable.

Each business that had cooperated by accepting at least one student also received a "certificate of appreciation" which was signed by the coordinator, the director of Adult Basic Education and the principal of the Community College, at the end of the academic year.

Soon it was found that work experience provided opportunities in the classroom before, during and after it happened, to enhance English skill development. For example:

1. Plenty of time was spent in advance of the interview with the coordinator to explain the program, and help the students identify their areas of interest and to decide what kinds of jobs they wanted to explore.
2. The students learned how to write resumes, which were then typed up for them.
3. They practised job interviews through role-playing.
4. They learned and discussed job search skills.
5. Everyday when they got back to the classroom after their morning work experience they would discuss it with their fellow students, practise new words and explain what they had learned and observed.
6. They learned how to write thank you letters. Everyone wrote one although some students opted not to have theirs sent out.
7. Sometimes the instructor would ask them to keep a diary and give them class time to make their entries. The instructor was primarily interested in content for this exercise and thus would make daily comments in writing in that respect. No grammatical or writing errors were corrected.

CONCLUSION

Although official follow-up procedures have not yet been established

it is known that at least twenty students got either fulltime or parttime jobs as a direct (or indirect) result of the experience. It is also known that four of them moved from the city and thus were not available for work. We must remember that one of the goals of the program was not to lead to employment, thus, when it did happen this was considered an added bonus.

Generally speaking the feedback from the business world that participated indicated that it had been a favourable experience for them also. Overall the students were recognized as being good, hard-working and conscientious workers. The one recurring comment from the students at the end of their work experience was that the time period was not long enough.

One problem encountered was that even when employers were completely satisfied with the performance and abilities of the student the student was not pleased with the idea of doing what s/he considered to be 'free labour' and harbored feelings of resentment for what was believed by him/her to be exploitation. To prevent such misunderstandings the students had to be made to understand the program totally before accepting the opportunity to participate.

Sometimes the students were unhappy because they were unable to continue with where they had left off in their native country (i.e; teaching a class, doing a scientific research project or being able to repair a leaky faucet on a housecall with a journeyman plumber). It was necessary to explain to them beforehand that they would likely be asked to watch for a day or two and perhaps give a helping hand to the paid employee who would be supervising. As the student began to demonstrate understanding and interest opportunities for increased responsibilities and 'hands-on' practise would increase. The students were told that in many careers they were not allowed

to practise until they had obtained proper licensature or diplomas. It is evident that if the student goes out with false expectations the experience will be doomed. It always worked out well when someone of a particular nationality had gone on "Work Experience" before and had enjoyed it. Word spreads fast and in the last few classes students were looking forward to having the opportunity of "Work Experience" soon after their course began.